

initial notes

The avant garde today is not a movement but a diverse set of practices and places. Whether we call it alternative, experimental, oppositional or counter cinema, it is clear that the tradition of innovative artisanal filmmaking from Deren to Snow (and its parallel movements in England, Germany, Austria, etc.) that is most often presented as the history of avant garde film is in a state of change. Some say that a period has ended and that we must go on to something else. Others say that we are not finished with the tradition but that it is going through a period of decline due to any number of external or internal factors.

In any case it is clear that a certain phase or line of development of the avant garde has come to a definitive point in its development. The basic idea of an art cinema that is organized around the individual artist rather than a collective creation, and that concerns itself with the assumed evolving creation of a body of work, is a core assumption. There is also the basic assumption that a certain technology defines this movement, specifically 16mm film. The other dominant conventions of this movement are that filmmaking is essentially a personal form of expression and that certain aspects of expression in the avant garde are essentially individual to that artist. That is the artist does not simply work within the realm of established conventions in either the general society or even the existing art world. The true, creative and individual artist goes beyond that and brings to the process of artistic creation something else, something new, a set of interior personal concerns or forms expression that themselves must be assimilated by the audience and critics of the avant garde. In other words, the artist is not simply a communicator, but enters into the act of communication and brings in his/her own unique contribution and that the audience in turn must accept that aspect of the artist's work on its own terms. In some ways this leads to a glorification of self expression for its own sake or to a justification for extremely hermetic statement.

This movement has other characteristics too. It explores the conventions and nature of perception, particularly visual perception, and its work tends to be oriented around metaphors that are concentrated in this form of investigation--e.g. "visionary film". There is also a concern for the self exploration of the medium, often phrased in terms of art being in the 20th century the exploration and exploitation of the nature of the medium at hand (NB--what then of intermedia?). A certain set of values are promulgated with this system. Questions of authenticity and originality are primary. Traditional forms of dramatic narrative, embodied most obviously in the Hollywood model, are rejected. It is also the case that the avant

garde tends to write its own history of cinema which discards the dominant cinema and which creates its own set of forebears, be those Lumiere and Melies or the French Surrealists and German dadaists. or the soviet directors of the 1920s.

The great power of this movement was that it seemed to have a unique sense of purpose which was to explore the cinema, to understand it and its means of expression in a unique way.

In addition it was a kind of cinema that could be made very cheaply relative to other forms of cinema in its own time and relative to the cost of making film today. It also saw itself as linked to other fine arts, in particular poetry, painting, and music. It benefited as well from an ideology of being itself a movement (New American Cinema) and of being linked to a larger pattern of cultural change, be that the counterculture or youth culture of the sixties or the artistic world of the sixties. In some ways too the movement had a certain kind of geographic unity, although this needs to be carefully thought out so that we don't just assume that it is best known in certain forms and places and ignore other examples and counter examples. It also generated a certain amount of self description in magazines such as film culture and books such as Sheldon Renan's work which gave a certain unity to a body of work that was actually quite diverse, and which probably on close examination could not be so easily put together in one overall framework. It is also the case that this concentration has left out certain other areas--lots of regional work. And the European counter cinema tradition has been dropped out as well.

(This analysis leaves out the realist tradition)

Today we are in a different situation.

Changes in the media have created a different situation: most notably television is now much more pervasive a part of our media culture and much more a part of the consciousness of those who grew up in the post world war 2 era. In addition, economic situations have changed as well. Finance of work has changed from a situation of self financing to dependence on systems of state support and dependence on large scale formal institutions.

There is a different, perhaps smaller, audience. In addition, feminism has raised questions that are important both in terms of questioning some of the dominant themes of the new American Cinema, and in terms of the audience. There is a certain argument that the turn to narrative is itself an attempt to broaden the audience (eg bette gordon,).

(the above is based on remarks by Simon Field at the SAIC in April 86°)